

ELK MANAGEMENT IN AREAS WITH BRUCELLOSIS

2014 WORK PLAN

October 10, 2013 Final Adoption by Fish and Wildlife (FW) Commission

This is a proposed 2014 annual work plan that has been generally assembled by FWP with input from the Elk Management Guidelines in Areas with Brucellosis Working Group and has been further modified based upon public review and input. One relatively consistent element of public comment is the continued expectation or advocacy for local working groups. While to date local working groups have not been identified in all areas, FWP continues to coordinate that local capacity. Public comment has also emphasized the need for greater definition of these local working groups and their products. That additional clarity has been added below.

Given ongoing efforts to identify local working groups that may develop and submit area specific work plans for public review and FW Commission adoption, this work plan is proposed as a “default” work plan for implementation in 2014 by FWP until/unless other specific work plans replace it or are added to it. While actions may be applied in any sequence and/or in combination, lethal removal should be considered only after other nonlethal means have been considered and/or applied and are deemed insufficient. Although some actions (dispersal hunts, fencing, hazing, etc.) are available for implementation if adopted as Final in October 2013, other potential management actions would require additional Commission process prior to implementation (biennial season setting, lease approval, etc.).

Potential management actions identified here may be implemented no later than December 31, 2014. Other management actions that may be identified prior to December 31, 2014 but not enumerated here may require additional Commission process. The next annual summary of management efforts and results and any 2015 work plan(s) adoption are tentatively scheduled for Commission review in August 2014. Any additional or replacement work plans from local working groups may be proposed for public review and Commission adoption at the time they are assembled. Fundamentally, these actions are meant to reduce the risk of transmission while also maintaining elk presence on the broad landscape.

2014 WORK PLAN MANAGEMENT ACTIONS AVAILABLE FOR APPLICATION WITHIN THE DESIGNATED SURVEILLANCE AREA

Unknown number of local private land elk hazing efforts from the end of the general firearm season and through the risk period (January 15 - June 15) throughout the Designated Surveillance Area (DSA). Prior to implementation, hazing efforts shall recognize and provide areas of functional and sufficient winter habitat with adequate forage and security available for elk. Hazing efforts will respond to changing environmental circumstances to ensure these requirements are met. Enhance description

of potential and actual commingling before and after hazing to improve annual assessment of effectiveness.

Unknown number of small scale fencing efforts (stackyards, feed lines) throughout the DSA. These efforts shall mimic the existing game damage process whereby FWP is responsible for materials and the landowner is responsible for installation and routine maintenance. Public access circumstances (see last bullet below) may influence consideration of temporary vs. permanent fencing materials from FWP or fencing materials provided by another entity. Enhance description of potential and actual commingling before and after fencing to improve annual assessment of effectiveness.

Unknown number of small scale lethal elk management removals (EMR) throughout the DSA during the risk period. The total elk lethally removed by EMRs and kill permits (see below) during the 2014 risk season shall not exceed 250 elk for the entire DSA and not more than 25 elk may be taken during EMRs in individual hunting districts (HDS) identified as being below management objective in the most recent FWP survey efforts. The most recent elk surveys revealed not less than 24,000 elk directly observed within the DSA. EMRs may be applied on private lands and Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC) lands but may not include Montana state lands managed as Wildlife Management Areas. Each EMR may not harvest more than 10 elk and would be individually described (dates, area, number of hunters, etc.) by FWP regional staff working directly with the landowner(s) involved. Non-lethal actions will be considered and evaluated for potential effectiveness prior to implementing EMRs. EMRs will be used to adjust elk distribution and not for population control. Hunters will be selected using mechanisms comparable to those used for game damage hunts. Multiple EMRs (each up to 10 harvested elk) could be applied in the same area/same time but each would require specific approval. Antlered and/or antlerless elk may be made available for take depending upon circumstances that include herd composition, population status and risk to other elk and cattle from reproductive tissues in gut piles. EMRs will be accomplished as early as possible in the risk season and no EMRs will be initiated after April 15 and all EMRs will conclude not later than April 30. Both the FWP Regional Supervisor and local area FWP Commissioner may modify and both must approve EMR proposals, including the sex/age of animals harvested for the purpose of dispersal. EMR area identification will be based on commingling risk of re-distributed elk on other properties. Prior to implementation, EMR efforts shall recognize and provide areas of functional and sufficient winter habitat with adequate forage and security available for elk. EMR efforts will respond to changing environmental circumstances to ensure these requirements are met. Gut piles will be managed to minimize the potential for disease transmission to cattle and elk. Hunters contacted for EMRs will be provided with written information addressing human infection risk how to mitigate that risk. Enhance

description of potential and actual commingling before and after dispersal hunts to improve annual assessment of effectiveness.

Unknown number of kill permits during the risk period in circumstances that do not lend themselves to dispersal hunts. The total elk lethally removed by EMRs (see above) and kill permits during the 2014 risk season shall not exceed 250 elk for the entire DSA and not more than 25 elk may be taken during EMRs in individual hunting districts (HDS) identified as being below management objective in the most recent FWP survey efforts. The most recent elk surveys revealed not less than 24,000 elk directly observed within the DSA. Kill permit descriptions and authorization will mimic EMRs with no lethal removal after April 30. Individual kill permit authorizations will not exceed five total elk and may be applied on private lands and Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC) lands but may not include Montana state lands managed as Wildlife Management Areas. Enhance description of potential and actual commingling before and after kill permits to improve annual assessment of effectiveness.

FWP staff will continue efforts to coordinate with local working groups to assemble more area specific comprehensive annual or multi-year work plans. This will include an initial presentation by FWP to ensure common understanding of the recommendations and brucellosis transmission dynamics. Options for assembling working groups include existing working groups, conservation or watershed groups and facilitators. Any local working group identified in this role will be open to the general public when discussing local work plan(s). In most if not all cases, FWP will be a partner in facilitating and summarizing these discussions. At a minimum, FWP will attend and provide technical input. It is not the intent of these local working groups to be rapidly convened for approval of individual actions when individual commingling events occur. Rather, the working group shall assemble an annual plan. The intended work product will be the identification and description of significant commingling events that may be anticipated, an assessment of what management action(s) may be most effective and why and what concerns might exist. In addition to enhanced public understanding of program scope and scale, this product may improve management response time. When completed, this local work plan will be presented to the Commission for public review and comment. Given issue complexity, divergent perspectives, time and interest required, and apparent tolerance (by some) for agency implementation in 2013, it is still unconfirmed in some areas what working group(s) will assume this task despite continued FWP efforts in 2013 to communicate with local working groups. That said, it is clear some advocates and the statewide working group look for the working group component to be enhanced in 2014.

Explore potential habitat management adjustments on WMAs and other lands and hunting season recommendations designed to foster adjusted elk distribution. A working group setting would be fitting for both topics but that does not preclude recommendations

that may be proposed independent of a working group. The biennial season setting process for the 2014 – 2105 hunting seasons begins in December 2013.

Work with Montana Department of Livestock and USDA APHIS to assess and coordinate the need, opportunity and capacity for continued targeted elk surveillance captures beyond 2015.

Continue to explore and implement effective communication, education and outreach with the FW Commission, general public and landowners. While FWP will continue to coordinate local working groups open to all interested parties, those efforts should not be confused with necessary conversations between landowners and FWP about the literal implementation details of approved management actions that include hazing, fencing, and EMRs. These smaller and very site specific conversations are essential to identify logistics that may include fence material definitions and open/closed areas for an EMR hunt on a specific ranch.

Continue to evaluate public hunting access in the implementation of management efforts. Recognize that restricted or no access may contribute to elk distributions, numbers and concentrations that potentially enhance the risk of transmission. In these circumstances any comprehensive management response to reduce commingling and transmission risk should include efforts to disperse elk concentrations and reduce numbers that are over objective. Where concentrations of elk are associated with limited or restricted public hunting access in the past, Commission-approved assistance from FWP may be based upon the confirmation of landowner tolerance or interest for public hunting access in the future or some other effective means to disperse elk during the general hunting season. These circumstances may be best addressed with local working groups. Again, the presence or absence of an effective management response to these problematic situations as part of an overall comprehensive effort may influence the Commission's approval for other specific management actions on these properties. This recognizes that there may be specific circumstances where hunting access is logistically impractical for reasons that might include proximity to home sites, no elk present during the hunting season, small acreage, etc.